DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 283 212 CS 210 659

AUTHOR Schwertman, Kathryn A.
TITLE The Mystery of Misconnecting Agendas.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; College English; *Communication Skills; Feedback; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Prewriting; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Role; *Teacher Student Relationship; Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Teacher Student Conferences

ABSTRACT

Many college freshmen find it difficult to explore their ideas about writing in the presence of teachers who have already decided the agenda for their student-teacher conferences. Teachers often feel compelled to lead the conversation and fall into an authoritarian model of interaction, "depositing" knowledge into students and ignoring questions that do not fit the agenda. When words or concepts become authoritarian--fixed models in the minds of teachers and students--possibilities for exploring alternatives diminish. Teachers must clear their minds of any preconceived ideal agendas and enter the conference willing to focus on the concerns of the student and the emerging narrative. The way in which teachers and students perceive what happens in a conference influences the outcome of not only the conference, but also of the paper being discussed--fixed-agenda conferences are likely to result in papers consisting of the students' approximations of the teacher's idea of an ideal treatment of the subject. A preferable conference scenario involves dialogue, a chance for students to formulate their own ideas with feedback from the teacher, whereby the resulting papers will take the form students decide is rhetorically appropriate to their intentions as writers. Students often know where their weaknesses as writers lie, but unless the teacher bothers to listen, an opportunity to make real progress in the students' writing will be lost. (AEW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED283212

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

THE MYSTERY OF MISCONNECTING AGENDAS

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Kathryn A. Schwertman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

By Kathryn A. Schwertman
The Expository Writing Center
269 Mercer Street, 2nd Floor
New York University
New York, N.Y. 10003

(Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987)

CS210659

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

THE MYSTERY OF MISCONNECTING AGENDAS

Judy, one of my students, was having a conference with me one day in which she tried to explain her problem. Judy said:

> See, cause I have so much to say every time I try to write down one little bit, I say wait, I should put this in also, and then I say, no, I have to keep this on the side."

I responded by ignoring Judy's concern: "So, in your paper, it sounds like there's a thread here...can you say what the focus is?" To which Judy replied after a moment of hesitation, "O.k., the common focus to the whole thing I think, is....

Judy was worried about how to get her ideas down on paper without losing coherence. I responded with my own separate agenda where I was concerned with 'focus'. As a result, the student dropped her problem and took up my agenda.

This mis-connecting and shift of authority from student initiated to teacher directed, reminded me of what happens so often in student/ teacher conferences where I start off with best of intentions to listen to the student, but end up taking over the conversation. It almost always happens when I come to the conference with my own agenda different from the student's, and as a result the conversation misses; our agendas fail to connect. Since I believe in student-centered conferences where the student is an equal participant in dialogue with the teacher, the deeper issue is, why does the dialogue keep turning into a monologue despite my overt intentions? Why is it, when the student repeatedly asserts her concern, do I remain deaf and plow ahead with my own concerns?

These questions led me to examine more carefully the complex dynamics of conversation in a conference situation. I analyzed in depth the transcripts of two twenty minute conferences with two of my students, Judy and Jim, in the New York University Expository Writing Program. My observations and reflections have led me to conclude that the way I construe what happens in a conference, determines the outcome of the discourse and the degree to which I and the student either succeed or fail in communicating.

This was the case with Judy, who was writing a paper on The Dead, by James Joyce. The day before Judy was to have a conference with me, I read over her draft and decided in advance that the paper lacked focus and organization. However, what I didn't know, was that Judy had been articulating her ideas to all her friends and in fact had her ideas worked out quite well. Her real problem was how to get the ideas down on paper.

After unsuccessfully presenting her concerns 3 more times in the first 15 minutes of the conference, Judy finally abandoned her agenda and allowed her words to be appropriated by mine. Whereas she started out doing 70% of the talking, by the end of the conference she was doing less than 20% of the talking, her responses consisting mostly of "yeah", "uh-huh", "right".

The dramatic shift came towards the end of the conference when I completely took over Judy's words and began writing an introduction and outline to show her how to organize the paper.

> "So it sounds as if the main focus you're trying to argue, is that Gabriel is awakening to his own self-realization," I said.

"Right," Judy replied.

"But by the end he's exposed by the people at the party so that he comes to see himself more clearly.

Judy then hesitantly attempts to formulate her own ideas: "Well, but see, I don't know whether I'll be able to do that, cause I don't know if I should do it any other way, because if I do it any other way....

At this point, though, I barge in and cut her off: "The problem for me as a reader, is that I don't know what you're trying to argue here from the very beginning.

"Oh, yeah, o.k...", Judy replied.

From that point on Judy had very little to say while she watched as I began taking over the conversation and composing an Introduction for her paper.

At the time I was completely unaware of what was happening. I was following a script based on my assessment that the paper lacked focus and organization. My strategy for the conference was to get Judy to talk out her ideas, and then as she talked, to question, guide, shape, and mold her words until they conformed to my ideal text. In this model of conferencing, I was the authority who shaped the student's words to fit an ideal text. So wedded was I to my script, though, that my conferencing style took on a rigid form, deafening my ears to the student's concerns and allowing for only one possible outcome of her paper.

This model of conferencing is not based on dialogue nor is it student-centered. It is what Bakhtin calls authoritative discourse. "The authoritative word," he says, "demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own;...we encounter it with its authority

already fused to it."(p. 342) Authoritative discourse is limiting because it closes off the student's voice and restricts the student from independent thinking. The outcome for Judy was that she had no choice but to surrender her voice and conform to my authority.

When teacher and student collude to accept an authoritarian model of conferencing, they implicitly fall into a monologue where, as Freire points out, the teacher as Authority "deposits" knowledge into the student. The student tries to conform to whatever the authority is at that time. For example, when I asked Judy if she thought her paper needed an introduction, she replied, "Well, I don't know, I just tried to do what the other T.A. wanted at the time; she was trying to achieve the goal of getting rid of the introduction." Judy does not stop to consider what she as a writer thinks about introductions. She simply adds or subtracts the introduction according to what she thinks the teacher wants.

Authoritarian discourse also sets up a conference space in which, according to Bakhtin, there is "no space around the conversation to play in, no contradictory emotions....and the context around it dries up; words dry up." (p. 344) In my conference with Judy her words literally dried up as I foisted my suggestions upon her. Greg, another student of mine said, "Suggestions are not as helpful as questions. .. because if suggestions are made, it's pretty much closing off whatever I was going to do, and pretty much saying that this should be done." Greg's words reminded me of a remark by Jerome Bruner who said that a bad therapist is one who has a rigid script and imposes a closure

on the conversation too soon, as opposed to a good therapist who keeps the dialogue open.

The analogy of conferencing with therapy is perhaps useful since it was the theories of Winnicott, a child psychiatrist, which led me to consider a different model of conferencing. Winnicott viewed the conference room as a "holding space" where play can take place. Winnicott is here describing the play of the professional and the client in the conference room, but he also addresses the ability of each person to play independently with different ideas, voices and images, and the larger capacity to play within the constructs of the culture. Winnicott claims that "the place where cultural experience is located is in the potential space between the individual and the environment ....The same can be said of playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play." (p. 100).

As a result, I have come to construe the conference differently now as a special space where teacher and student engage in a free and creative exchange of ideas and negotiate meaning together. The teacher's role is that of the professional who turns the conference space into a safe holding place which contains and sets boundaries and constraints on the dialogue. The "holding space" is a safe place where both teacher and student can "play" with ideas. It is a place where the student has the freedom to move from a disorganized state of ideas to an integrated vision of what he/she desires to communicate. In order for this play space to exist between teacher, student and text, the relationship must be based on freedom rather than on authority.

When the writing conference is construed in this fashion, it sets up what Bakhtin calls internally persuasive discourse, "as opposed to one that is externally authoritative. . . The internally persuasive word is half ours and half someone's else's. Its creativity and productiveness consists precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words(p. 345)."

It is difficult, however, for many freshman writers to explore their ideas in the presence of a teacher who represents authority. "Well, what do you think," they ask, or, "I don't know, I don't have any ideas," or "Well, its just my opinion". But at some point, if a student is to attain true independent thinking, he/she must progress to entertaining multiple points of view. Within a multiple voice community, the student is forced to locate and define his or her own values and beliefs, within the constructs of the community.

I could see this struggle taking place in the conference with my student Jim, who was writing a paper on James Joyce's "Eveline". He said, "I read over my ideas about how the "father is the church", but the thing is, you see, in my mind, it was just like symbolic representation. So I couldn't think of a way to support it. I mean, symbolism is actually in your mind and that's a problem, I think."

Why is that a problem?" I asked.

"Because its hard, because you can't , I can't write, 'in my opinion'. But it depends a lot on my personal opinion, and my personal opinion is that I think that the father represents the church, but its very hard to support from the text, and also, it

makes sense that the father is, a victim of the church as well, which I would think is the same thing as the church."

Here, Jim is shuttling back and forth between what he thinks, and what is situated in the text. His ideas, which he is struggling to formulate, remind me of Paolo Freire's description of how the oppressed internalize the values of the oppressor. Thus, I complicate the dialogue by allowing Freire's concepts to enter the conference space. "Could you say a little more about that?" I ask. "How could the father be both victim of the Church and also an oppressor?"

By raising the question, I create a problem for Jim. Dialogue creates problems and the problems require solutions for which the student must reconstruct their definitions. It forces the student to think. "Because, " Jim answered slowly, thinking, "when you are a victim of the Church you actually <u>become</u> the church."

"Maybe you just solved your problem." I remarked.

"Yeah, cause I was thinking...yeah....that's it."

"Well," I said, "How does that happen though? I mean, how does it happen that if the church,...if someone oppresses you, or if you are a victim..."

Here, Freire's voice enters the dialogue through my own thought processes. I introduce the words oppress and victim, opening up the conversation to voices and concepts which have shaped my thinking. Jim picks up the thread of my and Freire's voice and weave's it into his own thinking: "Because" he says, "they teach you all the beliefs, ideologies of their church, so in

actuality you become the church. I mean, a representative of the church because you believe all their beliefs at the same time."

In this particular encounter I am listening with a hovering attention to Jim, trying to get inside his world view and enter into conversation with it internally, then bring those voices into the conference. The questions generate problems for him, force him to play with different words and concepts some of which are incorporated into his own reconstructed thoughts about Eveline. This can only happen in a conference that is structured to engender dialogue.

Dialogue allows room for this playing with ideas. Now, when a student first sits down and I listen to them, I am not concerned at first if their words or their papers are coherent. I ask them to talk, to tell me about their ideas. And as they talk, I try and listen for the theme, the main concern which they bring to the conference room. If I am too focused on my own agenda, I am apt to miss what the student's concern is. I think of my role as akin to the therapist who listens with hovering attention; with empathy to hear and see the world through the student's voice and listen to the echo of other voices. I try to clarify whatever the themes are that I hear, or to get the student themselves to clarify. I might interpret as with Jim "So are you saying that the church turns the father into an instrument of the Church's use?" Or I might use open ended questions to get him to clarify for himself: "Could you say a little more about that?" Through a safe and playful exploration of ideas, the student's thoughts begin to crystallize.

In a sense, our dialogue is a kind of text. I listen to the student's thoughts and feelings and construct them into my own narrative which I reflect back to the student. The student then either accepts or rejects parts of my retelling and weaves it into his own narrative. Together, teacher and student construct a narrative that is coherent and meaningful.

Often, in conferencing, I find that students resist my efforts to get them to play with ideas. They want the right words, the right answer. "How do you want me to write this paper?" they ask. Often they are worried that their efforts to create meaning will descend to chaos if they entertain another viewpoint. Multiple viewpoints can be threatening. The authoritarian voice comes not always from the teacher, but from within the student, a sort of internalized voice of Authority that combines other cumulative authority voices with the student's own idiosyncratic beliefs about writing. Thus, Jim keeps stressing that he must have "symbolic representation" in his piece. I later realized that this was a major preoccupation of his throughout the conference, which I failed to pick up on. Had I stopped to find out what he meant by "symbolic representation" we might have entered into a more genuine dialogue. In the case of Judy, she says, "When it comes down to opinion, opinionated essays, I have the most trouble because when I try to write down my opinion, I always think of another person's view. But you're not supposed to do that in an opinionated essay." Here, ironically, Judy's notion of what an opinionated essay is, prevents her from playing with different viewpoints on a particular issue. Most likely she has internalized this dictum at some point

in her schooling and added to it her own idiosyncratic interpretation of what an opinionated essay is supposed to be.

When words or concepts become authoritarian, fixed models in the minds of teachers and students, they close off possibilities. In contrast, dialogue opens up possibilities, and encourages students to be independent thinkers. Dialogue, though, has certain consequences for the teacher. The teacher must clear his/her mind of any preconceived ideal texts or agendas and enter the conference space with a willingness to focus on the concerns of the student and on the emerging narrative.

At the heart of the teacher/student encounter is a fundamental epistemological debate between positivist versus social constructivist views of knowledge. The crucial question we have to ask when a student brings to us his/her paper on James Joyce's Dubliners, is do we as teachers have an ideal text in mind which we hope to lead the student to compose, or do we see the text as open-ended, in the process of being constructed from conversations with oneself and others? The way in which teachers and students view what happens in a conference influences the kind of discourse that takes place, defines the nature of the conference space, and determines the outcome of the conference. If I go into a conference with an ideal text in mind, I am attempting to persuade the student to an internalized model of truth which I hold in mind for his/her paper and authoritarian discourse will result. The outcome of the paper will be the student's approximation of what he/she thinks the ideal text is that I'm looking for. But if I construe the

conference room as a holding space, open to multiple possibilities, and enter the conversation with a concern for dialogue, then internally persuasive discourse is more apt to occur. The outcome of the paper will be whatever form the student decides is rhetorically appropriate to his/her own intentions as a writer.

Implicit in these two ways of viewing the conference lies the extent to which we as teachers trust the student. Do we view them as inexperienced writers in need of guidance, or do we see them as knowledgeable individuals who are aware of their needs as writers?

As I've moved increasingly towards a model that construes the conference as a holding space in which dialogue supports a playful exploration of ideas, I find myself more and more convinced that this way makes sense. I have come to trust that every student brings a theme or concern to the conference room and have learned to listen for it. And I have learned that if I become too preoccupied with my own agenda, I will not hear the student's need, or be in a position to help them articulate it. Now I begin my conferences by looking at the student and asking, "So what brings you here?" "What would you like to work on?" I have learned that if given a chance, students really do know what they need to work on. They tell me the opening is not clear, or that paragraph #3 seems out of sequence for their other ideas, or that a sentence on page 4 needs fixing. The more I listen, the more I discover how sophisticated my students really are.

I have come to trust that the chaos will finally coalesce. That ideas will find clarity through exploration of multiple ideas. In the midst of this holding space, filled with the rich,

cacaphonous brew of words, ideas and personas, the student seeks to establish his/her own voice. They take what they can use, meld it to their own world view and in the end produce their own unique and independent view. Dialogue, set within the context of a holding space, stands at the heart of forging this integration by providing constraints or boundaries to one's ideas. Within those boundaries, though, exists the opportunity for both teacher and student to find a playful freedom of expression, and for agendas to connect.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. 1981. "Discourse in the Novel",in The Dialogic Imagination, edited by Michael Holquist. University of Texas Press.

Freire, Paulo. 1984. Pedagogy of the Oppressed, trans. by M.B. Ramos. The Continuum Publishing Corporation.

Winnicott, Donald W. 1971. Playing and Reality. Tavistock Publications.